The Work of Culture and C-19

In some ways, it seems too early to talk about the effects of COVID-19 on culture and cultural studies. It is mid-April and in the UK, from where I write, both the rate of infection and the number of deaths continue to rise. The virus has already caused tens of thousands of deaths worldwide. That there will be many more deaths, and further global spread of the disease, seems inevitable. In a live and evolving crisis, and a moment of anxiety and doubt, any attempt at a cultural reckoning might be regarded as premature or presumptuous; perhaps even an insensitive diversion from the more pressing task of saving lives. Yet many readers of this journal – as trained cultural theorists – can hardly fail to have at least partly considered how C-19 has already transformed the conditions of culture and thus the field of their own intellectual inquiry. And while cultural theory has its limits - and our own personal capacity for theorising might currently be limited - for those of us who remain able to work, our purpose need not be restricted to the anticipation of some *post hoc* contemplation, but might also involve critically interpreting the crisis's conditional present and its uncertain and indefinite becoming.

Knowing when to speak, or what to say, is difficult enough – yet much has already been said in popular media about the cultural effects of the C-19 lockdown. One line of inquiry has focussed on how enforced confinement has provoked an upsurge (a 'COVID bounce') in the consumption of cultural industry goods [1]. The home – notwithstanding its established role as the primary site for leisure and consumption – has become, by state decree, the prescribed option for all cultural activity. Of course, not everyone is able (or has ever been able) to regard confinement to home as an opportunity for leisure, free time or increased consumption. Those in essential occupations are still going to work, while many others are working from home, trying to do their ordinary jobs under crisis conditions. Others are home-schooling or caring for dependents; many others are ill or grieving, or simply too preoccupied with the strain of maintaining basic health and security to register much interest in recreation. Yet, in the midst of pandemic, we *are* turning to culture. Forced indoors, people are tuning into more television and streaming services, music and radio than before. Online, an abundance of new exhibitions, concerts, podcasts and dramas are being offered and enjoyed. Quarantine conditions are made bearable by familiar reading or the discovery of new works. People are also making their own culture – music, journals, stories, paintings and poems – and sharing them with others. Demand for home-based arts and craft materials outstrips supply. Gaming proliferates. While culture and arts may not be vital to the preservation of life, they are proving increasingly vital to preserving the sense of life being lived.

Yet, over a few short weeks, most of the producers of this vitality – the many hundreds of thousands of arts, culture and media workers – have seen their current livelihoods disappear, and their professional futures thrown into jeopardy. The pandemic has forced the closure of almost all non-domestic sites of cultural

production, including film sets, theatres, galleries and museums, studios, arts centres, bars and nightclubs, concert halls, libraries, universities and colleges. It has also significantly curtailed the activity of what Andy Pratt (1997) termed the 'cultural industries production system' – all those suppliers of physical equipment, infrastructure, facilities and materials. Service providers in circulation, distribution, marketing and selling have also suffered. A calendar of commitments has been thrown to the fire, with ordinary cultural workers – many self-employed or freelance, dependent and precarious – finding themselves amongst the most seriously burned. The short-term consequences for these workers might be disastrous, the longer-term effects on the cultural industries, as yet unknown.

More generally, however, the pandemic has served to expose the existing fragility of our cultural or 'creative' economy. The UK, unlike a number of European states (with Germany being the most prominent exception) had already imposed stringent cuts on the publicly-funded arts - beyond a small and protected elite - and otherwise encouraged the cultural sector to rely on their own entrepreneurial nous. Most small and medium-sized arts organisations have adapted to surviving on a perpetually fraying shoe-string or through charity or goodwill. For the private sector, while governments have offered some targeted aid to cultural producers, in the form of creative industry tax reliefs and 'strategic' innovation funds, the state has been largely content to leave small and medium-sized firms (the majority of employers) to sink or swim in the decayed pool of a stagnant economy. Creative economy growth – minor, over-hyped and difficult to sustain - has tended to be concentrated in ordinary IT and software industries, most of which have no direct connection to arts and culture at all. Across all sectors, hyper-flexible labour, already accustomed to a project-based existence, has been forced further into the web of discontinuous, wage-less or low-paid work that tends to offer only a minimal security and the barest prospect of elevation or escape.

Many workers have spoken already about the visceral, corporeal traumas inflicted by their sudden and enforced redundancy. Across all cultural industries, workers have reported being highly 'stressed, sick and skint', struggling to keep 'heads above water' or feeling 'totally broken' – so expressing the different and complex pains of economic injury [2]. Yet even before C-19, we might say that the UK cultural workforce was already 'low immunity'; a vulnerable body susceptible to almost any kind of economic shock. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, thousands of people lost their jobs in culture, found themselves re-hired elsewhere on less propitious terms, or else left their industry altogether. Recovery has been slow and government claims for consistently high (and high quality) employment growth can be regarded as questionable at the very least (Campbell, 2019). So when it comes to cultural workers (as for workers elsewhere) while C-19 might be regarded as an unprecedented event, a stochastic irruption in ordinary time, it could also be read as an expansion of an established trend, and, further, the exaggeration of an apocalyptic mood, since the virus has helped amplify some long-instituted feelings of precariousness as well as the inscribed social tendency to sacrifice labour to the prevailing demands of economic priority.

Of course, there are also some differences in this immediate crisis, given the abruptness of its arrival, as well as its gravity and intensity. In seeking to mitigate the immediate catastrophe, the Conservative government has been forced into emergency fiscal measures to protect the market and working populations. Like most European countries, the UK has offered its own high-percentage wage subsidy (80% in this case, similar to Italy and Slovenia) to both employed and self-employed workers. While these bailout schemes will bring immediate relief to some cultural workers, others will be cut adrift. Salaried workers in large cultural firms and organisations, and members of the managerial class, are most likely to benefit. The most precarious cultural workers of all – those subsisting as freelancers, or as informal or unregistered workers – have more uncertain futures [3]. We can be more certain, however, that one immediate effect of C-19 is likely to be the exacerbation of some familiar inequalities in cultural work. Irrespective of variances in pay, or access to wage subsidies, middle-class workers with established personal wealth, substantial family support or second incomes will be better equipped to ride out the crisis and retain their statuses. But working-class, ethnic minority and women workers, already long-disadvantaged, will be less likely to either retain their current jobs or be available to undertake any remaining and future work. Indeed, the general fall-off in work will exacerbate hardship for all those social groups that have historically suffered from the most disadvantages. Ironically, this includes disabled workers many of whom have long been used to having to construct innovative and resourceful ways of working remotely, differently or simply apart from their non-disabled colleagues [4]. No doubt, once we are relieved of confinement, many jobs will return – but by no means all. The IMF is forecasting the UK's worst slump in a century and if current government predictions of the loss of over a million jobs turn out to be accurate then - by my own crude estimates - it's quite possible that around 100,000 creative economy jobs could disappear, taking into account the relative size of the sector.

Yet, despite enforced inactivity, and imminent recession, it would not be accurate to say that C-19 has entirely destroyed the cultural economy – but it has transformed its composition and dynamics. How permanent these changes will be is difficult to foresee. But, as already suggested, 'the Netflix economy' (Harvey, 2020) has boomed, and global providers of cultural technology and logistics, and suppliers of home-based leisure (like Amazon and Facebook) have also profited handsomely. In this respect, confinement has served to consolidate corporate power, a trend which is likely to intensify, even when lockdown is over. Meanwhile, the lives of most ordinary cultural workers, firms and organisations remain suspended. Yet also, conversely, and inevitably, cultural workers themselves have begun to challenge this precipitous inertia. Facing ruin, artists have utilised their imaginative talents to expand or establish new (mostly online) ways of circulating and distributing their work, for free or for due compensation, while also setting up a plethora of crowd-funding campaigns and systems of mutual aid for co-workers and peers [5]. A crisis-induced economic infrastructure has established itself, based on mixtures of payment and pledge, barter and gift. Cultural workers have also found time to offer support to others – staging benefit

performances and special productions for vulnerable communities and essential workers. These have frequently been targeted at employees of the UK National Health Service (NHS) – who might now be more socially revered, but remain woefully protected and often poorly paid (McRobbie, 2020). Here, then, was some good-news, the glimmer of hope; and even a glimpse of alternative economic future, even if we could not with confidence call it a harbinger.

But what *of* the future, once (or if) the virus is conquered? Many are hoping it will look much like the past. The UK government is treating economic rescue as a temporary necessity, to be rescinded once ordinary business resumes. Unlike Spain's left-wing coalition, UK Conservatives remain ideologically opposed to the idea that something like a national UBI might need to be introduced to guarantee economic security for all. The government has had to endure the cognitive dissonance of implementing national programmes of support in the interests of saving a 'free' market that was supposed to render such interventions unthinkable or unnecessary. This does not mean, however, that once lockdown is over, capital and state won't press quickly for a return to 'normal'. But given that it was reckless normality – unbridled global capitalism shorn of social and regulatory protections – that has helped spread this crippling contagion, and that currently provides no insurance against future such crises, then we might be tempted to ask what kind of normality we would want to see return.

The future, of course, might simply need to wait. For many of us, the present seems urgent enough. Yet, in this extraordinary moment of predicament and pause, all futures seem possible – though many of them barbaric and frightening. But in the spirit of *Cultural Commons,* if we were to begin to imagine more progressively what the cultural economy could become beyond C-19, then I'd suggest there are at least three salutary lessons we might take from our confined contemplation.

Firstly, *governments can move quickly - and spend money - when there is sufficient need and a strong public demand*. They can mobilise resources and institute sweeping interventions to support populations and an agreed greater good. That they will more readily do so when their own interests (and the entwined interests of capital) are threatened hardly needs saying – as we saw in 2008. Unlike 2008, however, now there is an almost universal public demand for the government to intervene to protect *all* those affected by crisis. How quickly such measures can (or will) be rolled back is an open political question, and the scale of anticipated recession might significantly determine how it is answered. Yet, C-19 has not only brought to an end any fatalistic acceptance of the state as powerless against market reason, but also nakedly exposed that austerity was a matter of political choice rather than an unassailable law. Each tear in this ideological canopy is a look ahead to a possible new world. For UK cultural workers (and workers beyond), we should therefore expect better and demand more from the state. Enhanced social security and welfare supports and a greater protection against economic precarity - at least equivalent to that offered by our more *dirigiste* neighbours -

would be one good start. Yet we might also demand renewed recognition of the social value of arts and culture. Cultural workers may not be regarded as essential in the current health crisis, but, as we've seen, they do bring vitality and a value of a different kind. Culture and the arts might well-deserve some immediate recognition for alleviating the negative effects of social distancing and enhancing public well-being (Tsioulakis and Fitzgibbon, 2020). But our ambition might also reach wider than this, if, as some anticipate, C-19 proves instrumental in shifting the ways we think about public value, and what kinds of work are 'vital' or 'essential' (and which are not), then there's no reason why we should not demand a 'restoration and expansion of state funding for culture and, necessarily, a renewed acknowledgement, by government, of art and culture's importance for any liveable post-virus society' (O'Connor, 2020).

Secondly, *we can say that the game is now up on 40 years of neoliberalism.* But this time we will have to mean it. The truth of our economy has been exposed as a lie, one which might long have been known, but has been most rigidly supressed – that left to its own devices the free-market is not a self-tuning and harmonious machine but an engine of dysfunction and cruelty. The true costs of four decades of instituted economic short-termism and instability, and a rampant and attendant inequality, have been revealed within the space of a month, as supposedly 'agile' and globally interconnected businesses ground to a halt, requiring emergency state aid, and the low paid and vulnerable were thrown into the firing line of essential work and increased exposure to risk. Meanwhile, finance and many high-profile business leaders have sat back and done nothing, or worse, exacerbated the crisis – either through the slowing-up of vital lending and credit, deliberate obstruction of lockdown measures or the penalising of workers. The 'enlightened' CEOs and 'woke capitalists' (Rhodes, 2020) have absented from the fray, proving once again that when it comes to societal problem-solving, relying on the philanthropists or 'wealth creators' is a woefully inadequate strategy. What we have been helpfully reminded of, though, is that an economy is not an ungovernable fact of nature, but simply a *means of resourcing* – a set of social priorities and distributions that publics have the power to shape. C-19 therefore gives us occasion to ask, once again, what kind of economy do we really want? And we should certainly be asking the same question of the cultural economy. My answer would be one that values social (rather than personal) creation and shared prosperity, and not simply competition, copyrights and extractions; one that respects ecological limits and the other salient boundaries of life; one that is concerned with justice of contribution as much as distribution, and one that seeks to eliminate unnecessary suffering, ingrained precarity, and any undue inequity and inequality. A funded cultural public sector and a private sector appropriately incentivized, that can offer a greater variety of models of economic organization, including those that are more equalitarian and sustainable in character, would be another desirable outcome, and not simply as an insurance against future vulnerabilities. But it will also require direction from within, a new approach for these novel times, one that might involve cultural leaders demonstrating more vertical and horizontal solidarities and having the collective courage to resist any

imposed return to a painful austerity that sells art and artists short, restricts the widest genuine participation, and institutes countless and unnecessary games of competition and beggar-thy-neighbour.

Finally, *C-19 has given us pause to consider what culture itself might be or become, in and beyond the immediate crisis.* As noted, people in lockdown have turned to culture for some much-needed release, or for compensation and comfort. Any future value we attach to culture might well be influenced by a just appreciation that, in the time of national crisis, culture provided. But there is a danger here, also. Culture and art may well provide a good distraction from pandemic, but that is not their only purpose – if it were, there would be no reason to give them regard once the crisis is over. Such a view of culture as public 'giving' might also encourage us to disclaim our obligations to offer due compensation to the cultural worker – professional cultural work is not a hobby or a giveaway. Culture must therefore continue to provide material livelihoods for workers – and better work. Yet one of the other dangers of this crisis is that we will lose some of the 'objective respect' (Banks, 2017) we might have accrued for arts and culture; that is, we will fail to value cultural objects on their own terms, and in the context of the full range of aesthetic standards and practices established by artists and cultural workers themselves. In C-19, arts for 'health' 'well-being' or 'distraction' are immensely valuable – but other approaches are also possible and necessary. What about art as anger, dissent, or a challenge to the terrifying politics of pandemic? One thing that seems currently lacking in lockdown discourse is an appreciation of what we might ordinarily regard as a core purpose of art and culture – the sustainment of social critique through symbolic means. Popular coverage of the 'turn to culture' has been slow to foreground dissident cultural and artistic voices that might be taking societies to task for their dreadful failings. Yet those cultural workers who are brave enough to hold up the mirror (or wield the hammer) to our faltering leaders are going to be as vital as any others in helping us deal with and depart from the devastations of C-19. We would do well to contemplate that, as we move forward.

Notes

[1] See https://www.midiaresearch.com/blog/the-covid-bounce-how-covid-19-is-reshaping-entertainment-demand/ on the 'covid bounce'
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-lockdown-affects-arts-workers
[3] http://www.padwickjonesarts.co.uk/an-exceptional-case-visual-artists-and-self-employment/
[4] As Gini, a Disability Arts blogger has described: https://disabilityarts.online/blog/gini/self-distancing/
[5] For example, the UK Covid-19 Freelance Artist Resources List
https://ukcovid19freelanceartistresource.wordpress.com/

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